

Llandrindod Wells & District U3A Lecture Meeting May 2019

The Sinking of the Lusitana - Malcolm Meadows

Report by Clive Barrett

The Chairman Roger Malvern welcomed everyone, and made reference to the recent “May Day Medley” lecture day, which as well as being high profile had been very successful. He also mentioned the recent in house publication “The Art of Creative Writing” book ,which had been compiled by the interest group of the same name, costing £5, and available from members with proceeds going to the Welsh Air Ambulance. He said about the Theatre Visit to Stratford Upon Avon on Thursday May 30 th, and the Charabanc trip to Bath on June 20th .

The Chairman then introduced the speaker Malcolm Meadows, the title of his talk was the “Sinking of the Lusitana”, which happened within a few years of the Titanic, and was an equally extraordinary story. The speaker began by stating one needs to consider the First World War, but the war at sea didn't receive as much coverage . He continued with the fact that sea battles can be complicated, so he proposed giving an overview. Very unusually the speaker played some pieces of music during his talk, beginning with the Royal Marines with the general aim of setting the scene and getting the audience in the mood. In 1914 the Royal Navy had the largest seas fleet in the world. He also explained the strategy of the war from both the British and German viewpoints, and the different sea battles between cruisers and destroyers of the above two countries. The battle of Jutland was the defining one of the war, in the battle Britain and Germany lost significant numbers of men and ships. Criticism prevailed on the British side of how Admiral Jellicoe and Vice Admiral Beatty conducted their activities during the war. Germany were known to have threatened both merchant and troop ships, and an interesting fact was that the Lusitana was really the only commercial ship not to become a military vessel. At this time mammoth vessels were constructed for a race across the Atlantic, this applied to the Lusitana and the Mauretania. In fact the Lusitana was the first to cross the Atlantic in under five days. But on May 1 1915 she left New York to cross the Atlantic for what was to be the last time, with a large number of American passengers, and a somewhat suspicious cargo of small arms ammunition. The passenger list contained some high profile people,named by the speaker, together with third class passengers with very few possessions. Apparently Captain Turner did have worries about the effiency of his crew, and one of the passengers Oliver Bernard, an architect was clearly worried about the lack of the ship's lifeboat drill.

Surprisingly the Lusitana sailed into the known war zone where a U20 (Uboat) was already near the Irish coast in British waters. The Lusitana was only 12 miles off the coast, but Captain Turner was determined to keep a straight route to Liverpool. However when the Lusitana turned to starboard a torpedo was fired right on target, there being a big explosion which was noted by some of the passengers. The capsizing happened quickly and within 5 minutes of being hit the ship was doomed, and only 18 minutes after the explosion the Lusitana started to go down. The speaker then outlined the experiences of the passengers--- some jumped --- 764 passengers survived and 1195 drowned. At the subsequent inquest the coroner described it “ as a terrible crime--- contrary to international law”. At the sham tribunal in America it was decided that there was only one guilty party-- Germany was blamed for everything, and no charges of negligence were brought against for example Captain Turner or Cunard. There were even theories that Britain was itself to blame.

Two other explanations were offered, the boiler exploded, but there was no proof of this happening. Secondly the huge amounts of coal with consequential dust, which was a highly volatile explosive mixture, and this could have caused the ship to sink so quickly.

The speaker ended with a summary of what happened at the end of the First World War, with the control of the North Sea being the key. Malcolm Meadows then answered some relevant questions from members. Chairman Roger Malvern commented that the talk had been thought provoking, and that the lecture had clearly explained the fate of the Lusitana and that of the poor passengers aboard. The speaker for next month on Monday June 10 at the Metropole Hotel will be Fran Sandham whose talk is entitled “A Solo Walk across Africa”.